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Here be dragons? No, big cats!

Predator symbolism in rural West Wales

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Fig. 1. *Ros Coard examines a suspicious ewe carcass in situ for signs of big cat predation, prior to its removal to the lab for forensic analysis.*

This article is based on information derived from two fieldwork projects investigating human interactions with non-human predators. Most of the material was collected during an extended period of research in rural Ceredigion, West Wales, between 2001 and 2008. However, comparative material was obtained during a brief stint of fieldwork in Southern Africa during 2008. This recent research was concerned primarily with investigating the conservation programmes implemented by wildlife sanctuaries and reserves, but discussions with rangers on the problematic nature of leopards (*Panthera pardus pardus*) threw up information which added another dimension to findings from the Welsh context, where the primary focus of research has been mounted foxhunting.

During my time in Ceredigion there have been spates of big cat sightings, and some of my informants reported unusual livestock losses which they attributed to non-endemic or 'alien' big cats (ABCs). Such claims tend to be treated with scepticism and sensationalism by those outside of the farming community. However, my colleague Ros Coard, a forensic taphonomist, has been performing post-mortem analysis on several animals who met untimely and inexplicable ends, and has demonstrated that some of the individuals presented to her were indeed killed by large felids similar in size and habit to leopards (Coard 2007). But what interested me particularly was the way in which my informants rationalized their ABC experiences, and their apparently positive acceptance of these alpha predators. Such a position stood in stark contrast to their hostile reception and treatment of foxes, who were also known to predate on livestock.

The truth is out there

In an article on the rationality of belief, Sperber provides an account of a conversation with an informant who attempted to engage his services as a dragon-slayer;

> '…Do you want to do something?'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'Keep quiet! If you do it, God will be pleased, the Government will be pleased. So?'
>
> 'Well, if it is a good thing and if I can do it, I shall do it.'
>
> 'I have talked to no one about it: will you kill it?'
>
> '*Kill?* Kill what?'
>
> 'Its heart is made of gold, it has one horn on the nape of its neck. It is golden all over. It does not live far away, two days' walk at most. If you kill it, you will become a great man!'
>
> And so on… It turns out Filate wants me to kill a dragon. He is to come back this afternoon with someone who has seen it, and they will tell me more. (Sperber 1982: 149).

Sperber responded with excuses explaining why he couldn't carry out the request, despite his disbelief. Consequently, some of Sperber's article is concerned with a reflexive discussion of his own rationality: 'Why had I been so eager to refuse? Was I afraid I would have to confront a dragon? Didn't I know that dragons didn't exist?' (ibid.: 178).

My initial reactions to my informants' stories were reminiscent of Sperber's as I found the notion that large predatory felines were roaming the Welsh countryside implausible: suffice to say I was a non-believer. On the question of rational versus irrational beliefs, Sperber points out: 'It can be argued that the acceptability of propositions does not rest on observations and inference alone, but also on a number of general *a priori* beliefs and postulates […] We find belief in dragons irrational because we take for granted that things such as a heart of gold cannot occur in nature' (ibid.: 156). Big cats, however, certainly exist in nature, but do they exist in West Wales? And how can people's beliefs concerning their existence be explained? Unlike Sperber, who never had the opportunity to find out

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Fig. 2. *Fleeting glimpse of a leopard in Kruger National Park, South Africa. The poor quality of this image makes it reminiscent of the blurry and inconclusive images frequently provided as 'proof' of ABCs in Britain.*

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Fig. 3. *Rajah, a captive leopard at the local Borth Animalarium. Rajah was sent to Borth by his owner who could no longer manage to keep him safely.*

if there was any truth to Filate's story, over the course of my fieldwork I have heard some plausible explanations, seen 'scientific evidence' and undergone a 'conversion' experience myself which has transformed me from devout sceptic to someone who leans towards belief.

Perhaps the most significant narrative in relation to my own 'conversion' experience came from a local smallholder. In January 2004 she found the remains of one of her lambs, and the next night, came face to face with the predator she claimed was responsible: 'I was checking my sheep on Monday night when I heard loud snoring noises coming from a field near my house… I shone a torch on the animal to see two glaring yellow eyes looking at me. The animal, which was bigger than a sheep, then fled into the night. *It was a very frightening experience*' (emphasis added).

As will be seen in due course, Mrs Marshall's account stood in stark opposition to those obtained from other informants for whom fear was not the overriding emotion experienced during their ABC encounters. Perhaps, as a female living alone, she was less willing to accept the presence of a large predatory animal? All bar one of my other informants were men, and I felt I could relate personally to her fright. Moreover, her account was particularly interesting because at the time I was renting the field next to Mrs Marshall's farm as grazing for my own horses, and, at the end of December 2003, had my own unnerving experience there.

I habitually went to check the horses late at night. The field was large, and often I would have to walk for some time before I could locate the herd. My dog Max (an Alsatian) would typically run ahead as I walked shining the torch to catch sight of the horses. However, one night between Christmas and New Year I had walked to the uppermost section of the field, bordering Forestry Commission land, when Max yelped and ran back to me, tail between legs and hackles up. I shone the torch ahead and caught a pair of eyes in the beam. This was not unusual, as the torchlight would frequently pick up the retinal reflections of other animals going about their nocturnal business, but these were different. For a start they were larger and higher off the ground than others I had seen. They were also an unfamiliar colour. I had been 'lamping' with informants previously (which involved walking at night with high-powered lamps and rifles, luring foxes with rabbit distress calls) and from that experience was able to distinguish between rabbits, sheep, badgers and foxes. However, in a matter of seconds the eyes had disappeared as their owner turned and vanished into the night and I was left to imagine who they might have belonged to. Standing in the darkness in the middle of nowhere, my imagination ran wild.

As I drove home that night I reassured myself that I'd seen a dog belonging to a neighbouring farm. Yet whoever I had encountered didn't behave in a canine manner – there was no noise, no confrontation or any engagement with Max. I put all of this to the back of my mind until I read Mrs Marshall's testimony in the following week's papers, but it wasn't until 2007 that I began to think seriously about what I (and Mrs Marshall and my other informants) had experienced, when Ros Coard told me about her own findings (Coard 2007). Coard's research, which matched tooth pit data on carcasses with dental records for a range of carnivores, demonstrated that some of the animals examined had indeed been predated on by large felids. However, most exciting of all from my perspective was the fact that Mrs Marshall's lamb had been included in the study, and the match for this carcass was positive. Consequently, at this stage, I am prepared to believe that there is at least one ABC roaming the Ceredigion countryside, and will address how it might have got there below. However, before getting into more ethnographic detail, I

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Fig. 4. *The second ewe carcass.*

wish to consider why the 'Big Cat' phenomenon captivates the British public in the first place.

In a recent episode of Channel 4's *The F Word*, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay was confronted with the possibility that one of the lambs destined for his kitchen had been prematurely killed and partially eaten by a big cat. The carcass was examined by a veterinary pathologist who stated that he could 'not discount the possibility' that a large felid was responsible (Fletcher 2007). Following the broadcast there was considerable media interest, as newspapers and weblogs debated key big cat questions: do they exist? If so, where did they come from? Are they a threat to us? Why are they so good at evading capture on film or in the traps that are regularly set to prove their existence? The extensive coverage demonstrated a preoccupation with these enigmatic creatures, an interest fuelled, no doubt, by the authorities' refutation of their presence: 'The British Big Cat Society, formed to monitor and research such sightings, catalogued […] 2,052 sightings between January 2003 and March 2004. *Yet government studies have so far dismissed evidence produced by these groups – as far as they are concerned, British big cats do not as such exist*' (Wilbert 2006: 39; emphasis added).

Feeling the fear: Co-existing with ABCs

Naturalist David Quammen considers the relationships between humans and other predators. He argues that our coexistence with these animals 'has played a crucial role in shaping the way we humans construe our place in the natural world' (2004: 5). This is arguably because the relationship has the potential to upset the status quo, placing humans and their property at risk from predation, resulting in a loss of control. Such a position is echoed by anthropologists who have conducted research into human conflicts with other charismatic and predatory megafauna (see, for example, the contributions in Knight 2000).

While Quammen is ultimately concerned with 'man eaters' [sic], large or what Quammen refers to as alpha predators (because of their position at the apex of the food chain) are also capable of attacking humans even when humans themselves are not physically the victims of their predation. Consequently ABCs in the UK, and in rural Ceredigion in particular, constitute alpha predators, despite the fact that no human has been killed by one and that their very existence is contested. For those who believe in their existence, ABCs have the physical *potential* to kill humans, and can certainly attack and kill livestock and pets. More importantly however, their elusiveness makes them symbolically powerful. We don't know how many of them are 'out there', where they came from, where they hide or how to predict their behaviour. This makes them particularly interesting 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966).

Specific examples relating to very real large felids might help elucidate this point. Indeed, conservationists working in continental Europe where lynx (*Felis lynx*) have been reintroduced argue that the main threat to their survival is that members of the general public know little about their behaviour and assume the worst. In actual fact, lynx and humans have been shown to coexist harmoniously (Cairns

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Fig. 5. *'Patrick' the Liger – the result of a male lion mating with a female tiger.*

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Fig. 6. *A selection of* cadno cwdyn*, or 'bagged foxes', on display at Llanerchaeron, an 18th-century stately home, Ceredigion.*

and Hamblin 2007). Research on cougars (*Felis concolor*) in North America has reached similar conclusions. Clark and Munno (2005) suggest that while attacks on humans are not unheard of, they are extremely uncommon. The more regular scenario is that cougars and humans coexist, with the latter being blissfully unaware of the close proximity of the former. Moreover, these researchers expressed frustration that cougars are extremely difficult to study because of their elusive nature, and predations on livestock are so rare that they cannot give accurate information about behaviour or population size: 'the truth is that no mountain lion has ever killed a person in the state of Wyoming, and in general, the risks are very small […] people's perceptions of risk [are] far higher than the actual risk' (Clark and Munno, 2005: 79; see also Wolch et al. 1997). As both of these examples demonstrate, 'mere facts cannot compete with perception' (Budiansky 1992: 3).

So fear of the unknown plays a part in building up the mythological status of ABCs in Britain, and the fact that sightings are relatively few and far between makes them all the more frightening for some, and is often given as grounds for challenging their existence. However, as Sperber notes, 'it is generally harder to establish that something […] does not exist than to establish that it does' (Sperber 1982: 165). In other words, the sporadic nature of sighting does little to dampen belief, and when 'normal' big cat behaviour is taken into account, their elusive nature should come as no surprise.

Whilst in Swaziland, I was informed by their Director of Conservation that leopards were causing havoc at Mlilwane reserve, where efforts are concentrated on the breeding and reintroduction of endangered ungulates. Numerous traps had been set to capture leopards who were taking a considerable toll on valuable antelope, and rangers were constantly on the lookout for traces of these efficient predators. However, the latter were equally efficient at evading capture and detection, save the traces of their predations. After a summer in Southern Africa spent looking out for big cats I was fortunate enough to catch a fleeting glimpse of just one leopard (see Figure 2), and then only because the warning cries of a troop of vervet monkeys alerted us to its presence. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that reported ABC sightings in the UK are contested.

Nonetheless, in West Wales, sightings seemed to be rather common and I have only once asked informants to talk to me about ABCs – all other accounts were volunteered during general conversations. For example, during an exchange about living in an isolated area, an informant described driving up the track to his farm and seeing a large, black, athletic animal loping across the field in front of him before disappearing into the adjacent woodland: 'It was only a few seconds it was there. I thought it was a big dog, but it had a long, thin tail and it didn't move like a dog. My neighbour's got a Huntaway [large breed of dog] so I phoned her soon as I got in the house and told her it'd escaped. She said it hadn't – it was sat with her in the kitchen! She said it must've been the 'Beast of Bont'! and we 'ad a good laugh.' I pushed him further. 'Well, I dunno what it was. It looked like a f***in' big black dog, but not quite, you know? So it could've been a panther or something, I guess – I know others who've seen 'em.'

Another informant described his pet cat running into the house one evening, fur standing on end. He went outside to investigate and saw something poking its head through the door of his chicken coop; 'it was about the size of our dog [a lurcher] and dark, nearly black. I initially thought it was a black fox, so made a loud noise to frighten it and it pulled back, looked up at me and ran off. It wasn't a fox. It was a large cat. Not a full-sized leopard or panther, but it could've been a youngster.' Later the same week this informant found a ewe carcass in his field, and so Dr Coard and I visited the site to collect it for forensic examination (Figure 1). One week later a second ewe was killed (Figure 4). This animal is currently with a veterinary pathologist to establish the cause of death, before being returned to Coard for forensic examination.

How they got there

The existing theories accounting for the existence of ABCs in Britain can be subsumed within one of two propositions: (1) ABCs are the result of hybridization between individuals released following the 1976 Wild Animals Act, or escaped, unlicensed exotic pets, or (2) ABCs are paranormal, cryptozoological entities.

As far as my informants are concerned, there is historical precedent of ABCs being kept as pets in the area

I thank the editor and three anonymous AT reviewers whose extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper sent me back to the field armed with more questions! Thanks are also due to my colleagues Ros Coard, Penny Dransart and Carrie Roth-Murray, all of whom have provided useful and supportive feedback, to Karl Jones, MBE, Scientific Director of the Durrell Research Institute who drew my attention to the possibility of ABCs constituting a keystone species, to Pauline, Richard and Rhian Bambrey for assisting with the collection of forensic data, and finally to my partner, Alexander Badman-King, whose patient listening and insightful questioning has proven invaluable.

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Fig. 7. *Campaigners at the 2002 Liberty and Livelihood protest march.*

(see Fig. 3). Of the accounts I have collected, many have been 'rationalized' in the light of the fact that a local man – Bob 'Scrap' – owned at least one large black felid who was kept on a chain at the yard from which he dealt scrap metal (informants uniformly assumed this was a 'black panther' or, to be correct, a melanistic leopard), and Bob's yard was, coincidentally, just down the road from Mrs Marshall's farm. As one informant who had visited the site as a child in the 1970s recalled: 'He had this huge black cat on a chain. It scared the s*** out of me. Better than a guard dog any day!' However, new legislation introduced shortly afterwards was widely thought to have sealed the fate of this animal, along with many others throughout the UK (Harpur 2006, Shuker 1989, Tomkies 1991). The 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act meant that ABCs that had previously been kept as 'pets' or trophy animals were (allegedly) released by owners who were either unwilling or unable to apply for the required licence (cf. Harpur 2006, Hooper et al. 2003). As a local farmer explained, 'I reckon Bob just let it go. I mean, it wasn't gonna go hungry. There's loads of places it could live out of harm's way, and we'd be none the wiser. All the livestock on the mountains – who's gonna notice if one or two lambs go missing every now and then?'

So we have a 'rational' explanation for the presence of large felids in the Welsh countryside. Indeed, the British Big Cat Society confirms that in the 1960s and early 70s it was perfectly legal to own non-endemic, 'exotic' animals such as leopards as pets without the need for a licence, specialist facilities or expertise. The Dangerous Wild Animals Act was introduced in a bid to protect both humans and animals by ensuring that only those with appropriate knowledge and resources could continue to keep certain species. Consequently some were given away to zoos or similar organizations, but many were faced with euthanasia or release.

One question which has been posed by informants who attribute their sightings to Bob's former pet is whether or not animals released in the 1970s could have survived for so long. Mrs Marshall was adamant that the creature she'd seen killing her lamb had cubs in tow, and my informant who startled what could have been a big cat in the act of raiding his chicken coop thought the animal was a 'youngster'. This suggests that not only are there sufficient numbers of ABCs to meet, but they are also able to reproduce (Hooper et al. 2003). Hybridization between big cat species is a contested issue (Harpur 2006; cf. Williams 2006), yet the breeding of Ligers and Tions in captivity, some of which are fertile, adds to the weight of possibility (see Mott 2005 and Figure 5).

Research on known populations of big cats such as the Californian cougar has shown that on average, adults will live to 10 years of age in the wild (Clark and Munno 2005). Consequently if hybridization theory is correct, the cat responsible for killing Mrs Marshall's lamb, and which I may have encountered, could have been a third-generation hybrid. However, we must also consider the likelihood that the population has been revitalized by the injection of new blood from escapee pets. Indeed, this was also more than a remote possibility. Another informant claimed he knew of locals who had recently kept exotic pets without licences – this was the rationalization he gave for his own sighting of a black panther-esque creature who crossed the road in front of his car early one morning: 'I'd seen it last year when I visited my mate who was keeping this cat in a disused railway carriage on his farm. I went in with it, and it jumped up on me like a dog – nothing nasty, just pleased to see me, and it had really soft fur – it was used to humans. He had it as a pet but it was a bit rough with his kids, so he said he'd 'ave to do something with it like… I'd've put money on it being the same animal.'

There are, however, other possibilities – that there is an underground trade in exotic animals who are pitted against each other in competitive baiting contests, or that animals are released in order to be stalked by trophy hunters. But, despite mentioning these as feasible alternatives, my informants were unable to provide narratives to support or challenge either of these assertions. Then there are the numerous theories which regularly surface in the cryptozoological literature – that ABCs constitute 'hideouts' or prehistoric cave lions who have survived from the Pleistocene (Harpur 2006). Or that they are creatures of our imaginations, and of myth and legend – like black dogs, daimons or apparitions from alternate realities, as per Gwyllgi, the wild dog of Welsh mythology (Harpur 2006, Jones 2003a and b, Ross 2001). However, I am glossing over these assertions because the evidence suggests that the more acceptable proposition, following Coard's forensic evidence and my informants' narratives, is that ABCs in rural Ceredigion are real, flesh-and-blood animals.

1. The importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between archaeologists and anthropologists (and indeed colleagues in other cognate disciplines) when it comes to the study of human interactions with non-human animals is the theme of a panel which I am jointly convening with my colleague Piers Locke at the forthcoming ASA conference.

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So having established their existence, and how they came to be roaming the Welsh landscape, it remains to consider just how my informants felt about coexisting with ABCs. Keeping in mind that the vast majority of them were involved in livestock husbandry, and many were avid participants in the local mounted fox-hunt, I was somewhat taken aback that so many categorically stated that unless one were to attack them *directly*, they would not wish to kill ABCs on their property or encountered whilst out hunting. Indeed, several marksmen claimed that even though their sightings had been through the sights of their rifles, they chose not to shoot.

Given the acrimonious relationship that obtains locally between farmers and one of the UK's largest indigenous predators, the fox (Hurn 2007), I was surprised that so many adopted such a position. However, closer inspection of the ecology of predation in the area reveals that ABCs could be regarded favourably by farmers in particular. Indeed, conservation biologists argue that a few 'alpha' predators can be beneficial to any ecosystem (Quammen 2004, Taylor 2002). As Quammen notes, large predators constitute keystone species who regulate the populations of those lower down the food chain: 'Lose the big predators, and there may (will?) come an over-abundance of middle-sized predators' (Quammen 2004: 423). This has obvious implications for farmers troubled by foxes, given the fact that larger indigenous predators such as wolves were hunted to extinction centuries ago. But ABCs are also symbolically powerful animals, and, given the widespread human propensity to use non-human animals as definitional tools, or as metaphors for human actions, this angle also warrants consideration.

Letting the cat, or the fox, out of the bag

My earlier research into foxhunting in the area suggested that foxes are problematic for local 'working-class' farmers on several counts. Firstly, large numbers were imported from England as *cadno cwdyn* (bagged foxes) and released by the gentry on their estates in the 19th and early 20th centuries to provide good 'sport' for the privileged few (Figure 6). For tenant farmers who were struggling to make ends meet, the introduction of these predators, many of whom escaped the hounds' jaws and went on to reproduce 'like rabbits' (*sic*) and encroach uninvited on the domestic sphere, the toll on livestock was a sore point and symptomatic of the Anglophilic gentry's removal from, and distaste for, the 'honest working Welsh'. Consequently, another contributing factor making foxes distinctly unpopular with my Welsh farming informants was their position at the top of the food chain, with no 'natural' predators to keep them in check. At least, that is, prior to the 1970s when ABC sightings started making the local headlines.

Being non-endemic, ABCs might also be seen as incomers. However, they had belonged to local people, kept as pets until the imposition of 'English' legislation forced their release. Their actions, too, no doubt add to their symbolic importance in the local area (cf. Wessing 2006) – they have managed to subvert political legislation designed to control them by eluding capture. So, rather than making them culpable as might be expected, it is the perceived agency of ABCs, and their position as alpha predators that save them, for the time being at least. This stands in stark contrast to the fox, and other alpha predators elsewhere in Britain and continental Europe, whose agency and encroachment into the domestic realm is feared and cited as justification for hostile treatment (see for example Lindquist 2000 and Moore 1994). In the case of ABCs, their agency is comparatively unproblematic because, while the wealth of anecdotal evidence suggests that they do encroach on human settlements, they have effectively returned to their natural state, acting as 'wild' animals should by, for the most part, keeping out of human sight (Kruuk 2002, Quammen 2004).

The significance of animals acting in such a manner became apparent when one informant commented: 'I don't mind if it's a big cat, but if it's a dog then we've got a problem.' I questioned her further about this response, and she explained that a dog attacking sheep was particularly worrying because it represented a domestic animal 'gone bad' – in other words, a pet or working animal transgressing culturally constructed classificatory boundaries and effectively biting the hand that feeds it.

So rather than regarding ABCs with fear, many of my farming informants appear to regard them as victims of human action, let loose following legislation and therefore owed a second chance – 'if they can manage to survive and don't do anyone any harm, then we should leave 'em to it' was one emphatic response. Moreover, these animals have achieved what they, as local people, continue to strive for. Having attended the 2002 Liberty and Livelihood march in central London, which saw rural dwellers descend on the (English) capital in their thousands to show support for a host of 'rural' issues and protest against the proposed ban on foxhunting (see Figure 7), and having attended hunt functions and meets in the run-up to and following the 2004 Hunting Act, which saw foxhunting with hounds banned, I can recognize that for my farming informants, ABCs can be viewed as highly politicized animals, 'as a kind of return of the repressed […] celebrated as forms of "defiance and resistance"' (Wilbert 2006: 45). The fact that official bodies refute claims and sightings makes locals all the more adamant that they are right. Therefore, it would appear that the presence of ABCs, who has seen them and who believes their stories, has become symptomatic of wider conflict, and sightings become yet another marker of 'belonging' in a rural community, or simply a lived reality for individuals united by a shared mode of subsistence or lifestyle.

Conclusion

This article set out to explain how my informants 'rationalized' their ABC sightings, and why the vast majority of them were prepared to tolerate the sporadic encroachments of these large predators. For many, sightings were perfectly rational, given the notoriety of Bob 'Scrap', the coincidental disappearance of his unusual pet in the mid-1970s and the local knowledge that others too had kept exotic animals who may have also been released. The presence of ABCs in the local landscape was therefore accepted and tolerated as these creatures, being small in number and good at keeping themselves to themselves, represented a useful symbol for many of the locals who were most likely to encounter them.

Aside from presenting an interesting example of the use of non-human animals as metaphors for human situations, however, this research also inadvertently demonstrated the value of both interdisciplinary collaboration and of anthropology's methodologies. Indeed, many anthropologists have benefited from undergoing some form of 'conversion' experience whilst in the field. In my case, this certainly helped me to empathize with my informants, and to consider the questions raised in a more comprehensive manner than I might otherwise have managed. I felt camaraderie with informants who shared stories with me, and in return, I could recount my own, admittedly questionable, 'big cat' encounter. In methodological terms, while Coard's forensic analysis provided scientific data in support of the existence of at least one large felid in rural Ceredigion, my own fieldwork experiences, coupled with informants' narratives and an understanding of local history, served to put flesh on the otherwise bare bones which formed the basis of Coard's study. ●

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